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AUTHOR Tedesco, Juan Carlos

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ABSTRACT

Despite guaranteed access to primary education and seemingly comprehensive enrollment, many Latin American countries have high rates of illiteracy. Four sets of factors affecting academic performance have been identified as contributors to the situation. External material factors include: the impact of malnutrition on intellectual development; the correlation between socioeconomic status and achievement; the relationship between type of housing and achievement; and the effects of child labor. External cultural factors are: parental level of education; parents' educational attitudes and values; different linguistic patterns among socioeconomic classes; and definition of the role of the child. Internal material factors are: extent of schools' educational resources; regional differences in resource levels; promotion and failure policies; and provision of preschool programs. Internal cultural factors include: teacher attitude, training, and experience; role of reading and writing; and teacher/pupil interaction. Studies of these factors show that many aspects of performance are concentrated in lower-income categories, rural areas, and the first years of primary education. Solutions should seek to improve the retention capacity of schools and quality of instruction. Particularly promising are attempts to adapt content, methods, and school organization to the characteristics and needs of the target population. (SK)

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LITERACY LESSONS

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Illiteracy and educational wastage in Latin America

by Juan Carlos Tedesco

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Illiteracy and lack of – or insufficient – schooling are problems which continue to plague efforts of national education systems in Latin America to provide schooling to the entire population, to improve the quality of education and to instil in everyone a mastery of cultural codes. These codes include the skills of reading and writing, elementary arithmetic, and the key values of social order based on the principles of justice and equality.

The education of young people and adults, both within and outside the education system, and the education of the school-age population have often been examined as separate entities, whereas they are closely connected. It is not uncommon to hear nowadays that public education systems are the breeding grounds of illiteracy and functional illiteracy.

At the same time it has been pointed out that the more developed an education system, particularly the formal network, the lower the illiteracy rate and vice versa. Studies on the subject have shown that efforts to reduce illiteracy by activities outside the formal education system have had a limited effect unless they were associated with improvements in the formal system itself. As a result, these efforts have come to be characterized as short-lived, isolated and generally out of touch with the demands, needs and interests of the target population.

If one examines educational enrolment in Latin American countries, the successes are quite obvious. With few exceptions, there is a certain tendency to guarantee access to primary education for the entire official school-age population. However, the picture changes when the problem is analysed from the point of view of guaranteeing that the enrolments achieved

effectively lead to the mastery of specific knowledge and certain basic cultural codes.

This relatively comprehensive enrolment conceals two shortcomings, the magnitude of which becomes fully apparent when one looks at the pyramid of enrolment rates. It has a very broad base, but a narrow tip. This situation is due to attrition resulting from grade repetition, delayed promotion and dropping out. Moreover, low classroom attendance rates at the elementary level are due to the need for poorer families to exploit child and adolescent labour to ensure their own survival.

Added to this is the continued deterioration in the quality of instruction, combined with obsolete curricula. Thus, education rarely satisfies the needs and interests of groups which, although sharing the same situation of abject poverty, present an enormous variety of cultural and socio-economic characteristics.

Problems have become more acute as a result of the economic crisis hitting the majority of Latin American countries. This crisis has also led to a deterioration in the working and living conditions of the poorest segments of the population, lower classroom attendance rates, and problems involving the quality of instruction. The nature of the crisis and the persistence of problems related to the low retention rate of schools make it difficult to foresee a significant decrease in illiteracy, while lack of schooling or insufficient schooling will obviously persist.

As far as illiteracy in Latin America is concerned, the most optimistic predictions mention a reduction of 25% by the year 2000, if present trends in public expenditures on education and endeavours to co-ordinate efforts in diverse sectors are sustained. The least optimistic predict a worsening of the situation, even a reversal of present literacy rates in some countries.

In order to understand these factors and how they are related, this article will attempt to summarize exist-

ing knowledge concerning explanations for scholastic performance. We will also consider those factors which might be seen as the root and source of illiteracy problems and lack of schooling in a significant number of Latin American countries. Lastly, we will suggest, on this basis, some proposals for improving the retention rates of schools and, above all, for raising the quality of primary education.

VARIABLES OF SCHOLASTIC PERFORMANCE

It is possible to organize the available material into four major divisions which allow us to take stock of current knowledge and the most significant problems which arise when attempts are made to define priorities:

- External material factors: *nutrition, housing, socio-economic condition, family composition, etc.*
- External cultural factors: *parental levels of education, attitudes and values with regard to education, linguistic patterns, contact with the mass media, parental participation in school activities, etc.*
- Internal material factors: *here, two subsets need to be distinguished:*
  (a) factors of a physical nature: educational resources and assets;
  (b) factors of an organizational nature: promotion procedures, provision of pre-school programmes, etc.
- Internal cultural factors: *teachers' attitudes, training and experience, educational content, methods, etc.*

Given the importance of *nutrition* in development, much research has been devoted to studying the impact of malnutrition on the intellectual development of young children. Attention has been paid to the most suitable means of early stimulation of youngsters suffering from socio-cultural handicaps, so that when they enter school they find themselves on an equal footing with children of a higher social class. As a result, there has been growing interest in preventive strategies aimed at children up to 6 years of age. Such strategies combine nutritional supplements and pre-school education focusing on intellectual development.

At a more global level of analysis, various studies have indicated a high correlation between *socio-economic status* and scholastic performance. Indices concerning socio-economic level are generally composed of data on incomes, housing, education and occupation, and there is no doubt that poor performance is concentrated on the lower rungs of the social ladder.

Worthy of note are studies comparing the material conditions of existence and scholastic performance, as well as the structure of the family and the circumstances of family life. Studies carried out in the mid-1970s noted a strong correlation between *type of housing* and scholastic performance. It was also observed that aggravated poverty led to new modes of family organization, growing disintegration of the nuclear family and restructuring of roles and relationships within the family. This appears to affect particularly the poorest countries and areas in Latin America. In rural areas, for instance, where the most disadvantaged sectors of the population are concentrated, migration and temporary employment are rife, conditions which profoundly affect women and children in particular.

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These findings have given rise to experiments which propose *compensatory strategies* to deal with groups in unfavourable situations. These experiments involve persons who have already failed at school or have dropped out, and children with minor learning disorders, and include care for abandoned children and geographically dispersed populations. Also covered are populations with their own cultural patterns, which education systems rarely take into consideration. Special curricula using bilingual and bicultural methods take into account pupils from indigenous cultures.

Many experiments have also focused on *community involvement* in the educational process as a response to the basic needs of the child and adult populations, taking into consideration their actual living conditions and everyday existence.

With regard to *child labour*, significant progress has been made. Parental surveys have shown that wage-earning child labour was not significant and that children's chores at home had no serious impact on scholastic performance. However, recent studies suggest that, among lower-income families, paid child labour does represent a supplementary income for the household. Various forms of child labour have also been identified which may affect scholastic performance, depending upon whether they are sporadic or regular, inside or outside the home, paid or unpaid.

The greatest danger of any discussion on external material factors is of having to choose between biological or social determinism. In Latin America, the biological argument has been refuted, yet no one can dispute that genetic capital does have *some* influence on educational achievement. Social background and socio-economic status therefore influence educational performance through a set of cultural variables and processes which is yet to be clarified. Hence our need now to analyse external cultural factors.

BIOLOGICAL OR SOCIAL DETERMINISM?

- *If educational achievement is explained by heredity, by nutritional levels during pregnancy and the first years of life, or by any other natural factor preceding school, it is obvious that the margin of action available to the education system, as well as to the entire system of social stimuli, is reduced to a minimum.*
- *When a sociological rather than a biological point of view is adopted, the preceding argument is seen as an ideological rationalization to justify the existing social order. Yet, the conclusion drawn is that the position occupied by parents in the existing social structure by itself alone determines educational achievement and that only changes in the social structure can modify the current distribution of knowledge.*

EXTERNAL CULTURAL FACTORS

In recent decades the social sciences in Latin America have concentrated on the problem of access by broad segments of the population to different levels of the social structure: concepts such as 'marginality', 'structural homogeneity', 'informal sector', etc., have attempted to describe this phenomenon. However, there has been very little research on the cultural aspects of the problem, and what has been done has had nothing to do with educational research.

One can begin to analyse the importance of cultural factors on educational practice by using a general hypothesis employed for the socialization process. According to this approach, the success of education depends on the extent to which educational activity in school corresponds to the context within the family and in the environment in which the child lives.

The link between social relationships and educational relationships has not been studied extensively. Existing knowledge of *educational relationships* – without being exhaustive – is to some extent convincing. Yet, with regard to the *juvenile socialization process,* knowl-

edge is not only scarce, but difficult to interpret, due to the diversity of this group, particularly in rural areas. Available studies agree that the situation is not static but constantly evolving.

- *Linguistic patterns*

Studies carried out in the fields of socio-linguistics and educational sociology, as well as quantitative research in the social sciences, tend to prove that scholastic achievements are linked to a pupil's language ability. Valdivieso, for example, showed that scholastic achievement was not associated so much with intellectual capacity as with processes specifically linked to language. It has been shown that children who repeated a grade did so because they were not capable of understanding what the teacher was saying in the classroom. This phenomenon becomes fully significant in areas where the teacher and the pupil do not share the same language. In addition, several works seem to indicate that conversation between parents and children in the lower socio-economic classes differs, in quantity and quality, from that existing in the middle classes. Nonetheless, little is known on this theme and educational research should make an effort in this area.

- *Definition of the role of the child*

This variable refers specifically to the way in which the child in each social stratum is defined. In this connection, it is necessary to consider the fact that one of the cultural factors which has an impact on scholastic performance is the absence of 'preparation' for the role of pupil. Studies have shown that the parents of low achievers have little knowledge of the functioning of the education system. Thus, admission into school constitutes a novelty not only in the life of the child, but also in the history of the family and the social group.

● *The value of schooling*

It has been maintained that scholastic achievement is linked to a series of indicators which reflect parental attitudes towards schooling. In general, one tends to accept that the children who fail belong to families with low expectations. They have a passive attitude towards the scholastic performance of their children and do not maintain ties with the school.

Nonetheless, other evidence indicates that the situation is much more complex. First, little is really known about the role of public pressure on the expansion of education. Second, little is known about the strategies adopted by families to cope with the scholastic failure of their children, and how this is assimilated into the framework of family survival strategies. In this respect, two hypotheses may be advanced:

- Scholastic failure is not interpreted as failure, but as the inevitable result of an illegitimate aspiration. In this sense, educational achievement is not an essential part of the family's strategy of survival. The family, according to this hypothesis, 'determines' the scholastic failure of its children.
- Scholastic failure is understood in terms of failure and constitutes a result which is imposed on families despite strategies to avoid it. In this line of analysis, failure is the result of objective and practically inevitable inequalities.

● *Educational resources*

Briefly summarized, the results of recent studies indicate the following:

- The material resources of schools do not permit the incorporation of new functions such as sports, health, art education, etc.
- The material assets of schools, i.e. the lack of or deterioration of laboratories and scientific equipment, do not permit the systematic development of non-verbal educational styles and practices.
- Material resources are unequally distributed among the population and between regions: rural and suburban schools are considerably discriminated against in the allocation of resources; the lower the age of the pupil, the fewer the resources earmarked for learning and teaching.

Hence, there would seem to be a distinct relationship between the external factors described above and the internal factors involving the education system. Precarious conditions of existence go hand-in-hand with equally precarious services provided by the school.

- The most affluent sectors of society succeed in obtaining better shares of the resources.
- Lastly, it is possible to argue that higher spending on education is associated with higher scholastic achievement.

The latter hypothesis is, obviously, the most significant from the point of view of the educational and political alternatives for the region. Nevertheless, it would no doubt be worthwhile to find a more precise expression better adapted to national situations.

Thus, for example, several national studies have failed to find a correlation between class size and achievement. Similarly, no relationship was found be-

tween the educational background of teachers and the duration of their training and achievement.

It seems obvious that an increase in material and human resources does not automatically improve the quality of instruction. Moreover, providing schools with teaching materials without modifying curricula, or without training teachers in how to use them, means that much of the impact is lost. Similarly, implementing a policy of teacher training without giving schools the material and organizational support to put this training into practice can produce identical results. Statistical studies have also shown that the availability of printed texts is positively associated with achievement, depending on the extent to which these texts are adapted to the cultural characteristics of the target group.

These conclusions must take into account the problem of educational financing. There is widespread scepticism concerning the ability of governments to increase expenditure on education. Research has revealed two fundamental attitudes: there is a serious need to examine the current distribution of resources; many studies take this limitation for granted, without necessarily accepting it as such.

- *Internal factors of an organizational nature*

Studies on educational policy decisions gravitate toward two major poles. One comprises all that concerns pre-school programmes and their impact on educational performance; the other, everything which is related to internal advancement within the system.

The effect of *pre-school activities* on performance and successful completion of the first grade is positive, but needs to be interpreted carefully.

Available studies concerning the effect of pre-schooling on performance and pass rates in primary school show that the problem of low effectiveness in basic education is situated in the primary school.

Furthermore, the expansion of pre-school activities can be linked to improvements in nutritional, health, recreational, etc. services for children in fringe areas where their parents work and/or where children usually take care of younger siblings. It is assumed that the extension of pre-school activity can significantly influence success in school by improving the conditions in which children are reared and freeing them from household chores.

- *Promotion and failure*

Another central problem with regard to the effectiveness of educative action is that of *grade-repeating*. One hypothesis maintains that the mechanism of testing and promotion brings about the high failure rate. In support of this hypothesis, a series of psycho-educational arguments were put forward, such as the existence of individual learning speeds, the deterioration of the self-image, etc., accompanied by the assumption that teachers' criteria for evaluating pupils were subjective and rigid. This led to automatic promotion in the first three years of primary school.

In fact, little is still known about the results of these experiments. A recent study suggests that in the countries where these experiments were implemented '... the accumulation of pupils shifted to the end of the first four-year cycle, or produced a larger concentration of failures in secondary school'. It is therefore clear that the problem of automatic promotion has not been sufficiently evaluated and that its introduction does not solve the problem, but merely postpones it.

Internal factors of a cultural nature include basic components of the educational process: the teacher, the curriculum, teacher/pupil interaction, evaluation, promotion and supervision criteria, and educational choices.

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES

It has been asserted that one of the main variables explaining scholastic performance has its root precisely in the attitudes and expectations of **teachers**. *Several studies have shown a close correlation between the subjective evaluation of the learning capacities of pupils and their effective scholastic performance. These studies showed that teachers' expectations were linked to the pupils' social background to the extent that failure is 'prophesied' and that this expectation determines the failure.*

Nonetheless, research carried out on a sample of teachers with pupils of working-class origin in Brazil suggested that they formulate their expectations of performance on the basis of real data obtained through working experience, and the expectation tended to confirm itself by the lack of appropriate technical answers enabling the teacher to prevent the failure of students. Accordingly, teacher training is the point at which expectations and achievements converge.

This set of problems opens up a vast field of investigation and educational development in which several key elements stand out.

- *Teacher training*

The training and educational background of teachers is an area most neglected by studies on education. Some studies found positive correlations between qualifications and performance in the first grades only. In the report on the determinant factors of scholastic performance, evidence was contradictory. But in order to evaluate different forms of qualification, a qualitative study of contents, methods, target groups and opportunities is needed.

With regard to teaching activities, it has been found that teachers operate with little understanding of the

surrounding social reality and also exhibit a large measure of bias. It is necessary to examine how these attitudes are formed. Perhaps existing biases among teachers may influence the design of future training methods intended to change these biases.

This brings us to one of the most widespread themes in recent educational literature: the problem of research and action. What influence has research conducted by teachers themselves had? What are the priority areas from the point of view of the social sciences, if not from the point of view of the teachers themselves?

- *The role of reading and writing*

It is known that the highest grade-repetition and drop-out rates concern the first years of primary school, and this is intimately linked to the teaching of reading and writing. Some studies indicate a tendency to abandon teacher training dealing precisely with these skills, concurrently with raising the qualifications for the teaching profession to the university level.

This problem becomes even more relevant in contexts in which the population speaks a language different from that of the teacher. According to certain studies based on classroom observations, the most frequent result consisted of ignoring this question, leaving the teacher with no methods whatsoever to deal with the problem. The usual responses on the part of teachers oscillate between reliance on interpreters (Spanish-speaking adults, children from higher grades, etc.) or total ritualization of the educative process.

- *Teacher/pupil interaction*

A first assessment of studies on this subject indicates that there exist different educational circuits, depending on the social background of the pupils. For example, for pupils of working-class origin (who have the highest failure rate), teachers tend to interact more with

high achievers, evaluation is not part of the learning process, and methods based on rote learning, memorization, authoritarianism, etc. are constantly relied upon.

Specific studies on the role of pupil/teacher interaction showed that democratic, permissive attitudes on the part of teachers were associated with better achievement rates. Nonetheless, other evidence suggests that a mere change in attitude is not sufficient. It is necessary to provide teachers with the ability to confront problem situations and to resolve them.

CONCLUSION

Strategies and proposals for action

A review of the studies which take account of the variables influencing scholastic performance reveal that many aspects of performance, and especially grade-repetition, are concentrated in the lower-income categories, in rural areas, and in the first few years of primary education.

The current economic crisis has aggravated the educational problems in Latin America and resulted, inter alia, in increasing the failure rate among the school population. To remedy the situation, various strategies to improve the retention capacity of schools and the quality of instruction have been proposed. The more promising and noteworthy of them are global activities oriented towards the adaptation of content, methods and scholastic organization to the characteristics and needs of the target population. It can be said that we are confronted with the need to adopt selective strategies aimed at specific segments of the population, especially the compulsory school-age population. The

available resources should be optimized and directed to providing basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic to those who lack them. The ability of such groups to demand satisfaction of their rights as citizens should not be overlooked.

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